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Creative understanding as a facet of comprehension is the prime objective of reading instruction. Understanding what is read is basic to any aspect of learning, but the learner should be prepared to go beyond mere understanding and to use information gained to further enrich his experiences and knowledge through critical analysis, creative interpretation, retention, and functional reading. To help the learner develop these abilities, the following keys are suggested for instructional emphasis: perception, communication, vocabulary, interest, and utility. The learner needs an adequate accumulation of percepts and a rich experiential background from which to draw concepts and understandings. He needs help in bringing meaning to and getting meaning from the reading material. He needs an expanding vocabulary and reading materials filled with interest-arousing situations which challenge him to discover the more subtle meanings and inferences of the author. He needs to know the importance of reading as a tool of learning in all areas of the curriculum. Then he will be free to read. (NS)

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KEYS TO READING COMPREHENSION

An Address

Thirteenth Annual Convention

of the

International Reading Association

Boston, Massachusetts

Friday, April 26, 3:00-4:00 P.M.

(19C The Role of Critical Reading)

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When I first saw the proposed program for the Conference, I was tremendously pleased to note that this talk was to be a part of a section on Teaching Strategies. Have you felt the subtle connotations of that term? Does it suggest to you something relating to careful, wise planning in preparation for shrewd maneuvers? That intelligent using of all skills and knowledge in the overcoming of handicaps and obstacles? This use and application of a well-known military term to the teaching situation gives us certain insights into, and concepts of, the importance of our task and the greatness of our responsibility as teachers of children.

In view of all this, today's teacher of reading must of necessity become a strategist in the fullest sense of the term's meaning. He faces an array of factors--social, physical, psychological, neurological, academic, and intellectual--which when combined often hold students prisoners to learning difficulties. The teacher serves as liberator who furnishes the keys which are necessary to the freeing of the powers of his students.

The Importance of Keys

Keys speak to us of doors and locks, or perhaps of chambers and dungeons, or of chains and barriers. We can almost feel the dark, foreboding prisons with their captives; and we are aware of the dim, gloomy, dank areas of ignorance or prejudice or apathy which need to be thrown open to allow the light and air, sunchine and warmth, of life itself to come in. Is it unreasonable to liken this situation to the minds of many of our young

students? I would like to suggest that it is the opportunity and privilege--not just a task or responsibility--of the teacher of reading to furnish a master key, Reading, which will unlock and open many doors leading to areas of excitement and enrichment, to routes of escape from the pallid and ordinary into adventure and exploration. In short, into the wonderful world of full ability to independent, rewarding reading.

Let me illustrate my thought by recalling with you the ancient, Eastern tale which reveals to us the importance of being able to experience personally the involvement of this "unlocking procedure." Our story is set in old Cathay. The hero is an ignorant, little half-orphan who roamed the streets in indolent irresponsibility. Here is a quote:

> The boy had been brought up so badly, and was so lazy, careless, and disobedient that, instead of learning all the wise and useful things he could, he chose to play about in the streets with other idle children. Even when he grew older, and was put to learn his father's trade, he still refused to work, and, directly he was left to himself, he would run away to join his wicked companions for the rest of the day.[1]

Have you guessed the boy's identity? Who was he? What is the story? The important thing is that one day, all began to change. It started with the arrival of an unknown "uncle" from faraway African lands. He immediately began to take the young lad in hand, working with all the skill of a clever strategist. He had noted that the boy was really, despite his careless ways,

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[1]Gladys Davidson, The Arabian Nights Retold for Children. (London and Glasgow: Blackie and Sons Limited) p. 187.

clever and quick. And as for Aladdin, he was quite ready to accept for his uncle a stranger who treated him so generously and kindly and who seemed so rich and powerful. As he was carefully instructed, he became dilligently obedient in fulfilling the exacting demands of his tutor, and as a result he was soon to see sights of beauty and lavish wealth unimagined in his sparse previous experience. You will recall his being sent into subterranean lands of vast halls and chambers filled with the most exquisite treasures, each becoming more wonderful and beautiful as he progressed through door after door. Through the acquisition of his magic ring and the wonderful lamp, this unassuming beggar boy became an ambitious, powerful man: one who ultimately married the emperor's daughter and became heir to the emperor himself. Just a fairy tale, you say? An utter impossibility? Not so!

The Teacher's Opportunity

You and I, and every teacher of reading, have a magical knowledge to be nurtured and cultivated in the lives of boys and girls--some of them just as undernourished and impoverished and deprived as young Aladdin. They are fettered and bound by limitations and enclosed by walls and barriers; and you and I become the fabled " uncles and aunties" who instruct and enthuse them. We guide them through sequential learnings past one barrier after another, helping them to unlock new doors barring their progress. In order for them to accomplish

this fete, however, they need keys. I have called them "Keys to Reading Comprehension" and I see them as keys which will aid children to be freed, to progress into wider, larger areas of experiences--first-hand and vicarious--that will make life a full, rewarding entity. I am sure that it was not by chance alone that the lamp has become the symbol of education and learning.

There is no one set of keys to be handed you so that you in turn can easily distribute them to each of your students from year to year. However, as we think together today, we will discover some keys that can be forged and shaped and used to open the minds of children so that they can discover some of the wonderment, adventure, excitement, and knowledge to be gained through their critical, creative, recreational, retentive, and functional reading.

It is a learning truism that when meaningful experiences occur, the learning and retention which follow are far more rewarding and permanent than mere rote exercises being completed without insightful discovery being present. Many authorities agree that reading is a thinking process; and this idea as expanded by numerous experts and reported by Michaelis (11), is viewed as a sequence from symbol recognition to ensuing stimulation of comprehension which results in changes in the reader's thought. It is this one facet of the reading process, comprehension, which concerns us chiefly at this time.

Comprehension Defined

Strangely enough, comprehension has become a difficult term to define adequately. Yoakam (14) describes comprehension in the following way:

> Comprehending reading matter involves the correct association of meanings with word symbols, the evaluation of meanings which are suggested in context, the selection of the correct meaning, the organization of ideas as they are read, the retention of these ideas, and their use in some present or future activity.

Smith and Dechant (12) have concluded that:

> In the reading process comprehension may be likened to the cake which must include a proper combination of ingredients plus the kitchen chemistry of their reaction upon being exposed to heat (or exposure, in the case of reading, to the mind's active and thoughtful reaction to its stimulation by the ingredients, the printed words).

Let's consider this effort adequate, at this present time, in defining our term, comprehension.

Passive and Creative Facets of Comprehension. Covington (3) has delineated two phases of this reading skill. He speaks first of the passive absorption of information which has traditionally been meant by comprehending. It is important that a person understands what he has read, and it is basic to a number of important functions in learning. On the other hand, the second facet of comprehension is called, in contrast, creative understanding. This implies that the reader goes far beyond the categorizing of facts and information. In the creative sense, he examines, ponders, questions, probes, and speculates. Using the information already known, he coordinates new materials and is continuously looking for paradoxes, inconsistencies and for

discrepancies. Thus a significant restructuring of his point of view is vitally developing. In short, the creative reader is constantly constructing his own meanings rather than passively accepting the interpretations and ideas of someone else. He is not overly concerned with how he is reading, but is vitally involved with what he is reading, engrossed by a rich vein of ideas, insights, and concepts which are stimulated and cultured by his reading.

We can all certainly agree that this creative aspect of reading is the prime objective for the reading teacher. This level of comprehension will extend to higher thought processes which in turn will result in the reader's reacting to what he has read in terms of critical analysis, creative interpretation, emotional responses or aesthetic appreciation. Even if we assume that such potential is latent and inherent in the child, we must realize that these abilities and desirable integrations need to be strengthened and set free within the student.

Keys to Reading Comprehension

What must the reading strategist use to accomplish this? What keys does he have to use with the learner in acquiring and developing these valuable components of comprehension? I would suggest several emphases on the part of the teacher which will aid the reader in bringing meaning to as well as getting meaning from printed materials.

1. Perception. As a necessary prerequisite for any real

comphrehending to take place, the child must have an adequate store of percepts and concepts from his experiential background. Today's reading teacher is vitally concerned with the idea that reading is a perceptual and conceptual process. The teacher of beginning reading is particulary alert to her student's need for many sensory experiences to provide the child with many percepts. She realizes that from the many single threads of percepts the fabric of meaningful concepts will be woven.

Perception has been described as a process involving three acts: (1) the presentation of a stimulus--in reading, the student sees the word; (2) the preparation for a response--perception itself; and (3) the culmination of a response--the reaction. In reading we need an adequate response--that mediating process which utilizes all that we hear, smell, taste, touch, as well as see. This requires a large store of percepts: informations garnered from numerous previous experiences and reactions, from which we can now draw meaning as well as impart meaning to the visual stimulus of the reading act. Perception is a cumulative process and it is from this accumulattion that the reader is able to weave his fabric of concepts and understandings. In comprehension the important, critical element is what is signified by the printed symbols rather than just what is actually seen on the page.

From all this, then, it can be readily seen that Key #1 is of utmost importance in successful comprehending. The teacher must assess the needs of students and then provide an abundance

of sensory experiences in order for her students to have a maximum of percepts. Many of today's young children have been deprived of adequate backgrounds, and educators have concerned themselves with numerous pre-school and beginning school programs to bridge the gaps in understanding. Frequently teacher assumes that children "know" what she is talking about in ordinary situations. A recent brief vignette by Grant (9) was published on the back cover of Phi Delta Kappan and illustrates this point graphically: young children were discussing rabbits and one of them kept attributing the carnivorous activities of hungry rats to rabbits. He simply had had no experience with a rabbit, but evidently knew what it was to have his sleep disturbed by the vicious rodents who also lived in his house.

I recently visited a kindergarten complex where I was supervising a university student in her directed teaching assignment. Behind the school premises were a number of small fields. Actually they were paddocks and there were several horses pastured there. Some of the children coming from the disadvantaged homes of the south area of our city were overheard to say: "Look at those big dogs over there, you'd better watch out for them! They'll bite you!" Those children were not joking, they had no previous experience with ponies. Key #1 is important and it must be used well.

2. Communication. A second useful key is labelled "Communication." It has been discovered that children are sometimes already involved in middle grades before they actually grasp the

idea that reading is an important medium of communication. That the author is trying to say something to them in words that they possess (hopefully so at least), in their speaking and listening vocabularies, is a concept that is frequently slow agrowing. When they decode the written symbols, they should be "listening" with all their senses alerted to get the fullest meaning from this receptive facet of the language process.

De Cecco (5) has stated that in seeking to study this valuable learning tool, we actually cross numerous disciplines and attend to their interrelations. We borrow fact and theory from linguistics, psycholinguistics, the psychology of learning, developmental psychology, anthropology, sociology, and education. This is done in our attempts to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of instruction in language and thought. Teachers need to be knowledgeable in teaching reading in order to increase the radius of communication and to minimize the obstacles to effective interchange.

Far too many young readers have learned techniques of decoding, and certainly these are important, but these same readers have not yet discovered how to let these symbols signify the excitement and adventure of unlocking a hidden message in code. How great if each child might experience in the reading act the same thrill that the hero of some juvenile mystery finds in unravelling the secret communication of a coded message which he may have intercepted. We, reading teachers, have in our hand a key--The Key of Communication--to be used and transmitted to students for their

use, too.

Whenever I think of this communicating aspect of reading, I am reminded of a personal incident. It was Christmas season several years ago and we were visiting my sister and her family of four lively little boys. The third in the series was then in his fourth year, and had learned from his two older brothers the magic secret of unlocking written symbols: he could read! I had teasingly said to him: "You can't really read!" To prove his prowess, he had picked up the nearest book at hand, a world atlas that one of the older boys had received for a Christmas gift. Opening the book at random, he found himself looking at a map of Europe. As he correctly read several of the names of countries, France, England, Germany, etc., his look of triumph assured me that those symbols were "saying" something to him. Then as he came to the letters, U.S.S.R., he paused momentarily and then quizically said: "I don't think it is right, Uncle, but it looks like it is saying USSER!" He was pretty close, but it didn't communicate anything to him, and he was confused and uncertain. There are numerous students whose reading material and the reading act have not said anything to them. They feel trapped. We have a necessary key for the situation. Building upon the known vocabulary of the child, let us help them free themselves from the confusion and fears generated by their reading not communicating any message to them. The key to the code is called communication.

3. Vocabulary. A third key for us to examine today is called "The Key of Vocabulary." What an important component this is!

In the

In the very beginning, the knowledge of words and language facility are basic to the child's learning to read. Loban (10) points out that schools are beginning to be aware that research shows a powerful linkage between oral language, vocabulary usage, and reading. Indeed, he asserts that this relationship is much greater than has previously been realized. If this is true, and I am sure that it is, there are definite implications here for the teacher of reading. Let us think of a few examples.

Throughtout the years comprising the school experience, there needs to be many occasions when the teachers read aloud with their students. These are those delightful times when age is no barrier and language communication becomes alive with humor or pathos, excitement and adventure--a time of shared feelings. Good speakers with fine voices need to be heard via recordings, too. Successful guest speakers who come from varied backgrounds can talk with and to student groups or classes. Poetry and drama should frequently be used in the classroom. This high-level use of oral language will often prove to be shere music in the children's ears. And, as they are daily exposed to many words and good diction, they will begin to make identifications themselves. These at first may be tenuously frail, but little-by-little, these new exposures and their attempts to emulate them, will be strengthened and become their personal additions to vocabulary.

It is my feeling that probably one of the most valuable emphases growing from the increased interest in linguistics will prove to be the stress on etymology, lexicography, and semantics.

This scientific study of words and their origins with their varied meanings and usages should provide stimulation and enrichment in the very knowledge of words themselves. Frequently this association with a particular word helps the learner to retain his new vocabulary acquisitions and make use of them more easily.

As a result of this new emphasis on words, I have recently become aware of published books for children and teachers to use in the study of the history of words and terms. These include: (1) Sparke's Story of the English Language (13), (2) Webb Garrison's What's in a Word?, and (3) Funk's four books: Hog on Ice and Other Curious Expressions, Horse Feathers and Other Curious Words, Thereby Hangs a Tale: Stories of Curious Word Origins, and Heavens to Betsy and Other Curious Sayings. (7). Garrison states in the forward to his book:

> Words and phrases make up the glue that holds civilization together.
>
> Like persons who shape and use them, the raw materials of communication are flexible and fluid. Every word has both a personality and a history. It is rooted in the past, but stretches forward toward the future.
>
> Because of this dynamic factor in language practically all the individual components of speech literally tell a story. No account of What's in a Word is ever complete; always the life history of a vivid phrase or a colorful expression must have a rather arbitrary beginning, and few endings are final. There were long periods of development, perhaps in the period of prehistory, before a given term erupted into prominence.
>
> So the brief stories in this volume are more like vignettes than biographies. Interest is the chief criterion used to determine those included.

However, valuable as this key may be, I feel that it is necessary to remind you that the teacher, here again, is the important component to success. The value and importance of the knowledge of words will only be generated as the teacher is able to transmit something of his own attitude and enthusiasm to the student. He must use words, wonderful, varied, descriptive words. It is essential that he cultivates an expanded vocabulary for his own use, and then shares it with his students. Boys and girls of all ages can become intrigued by new words. It is a delightful experience to introduce them to "big" words and then to overhear them being used. In reading we teach them to unlock words, but if they don't know those words, what can it mean to them? How can they comprehend?

Probably one of the most serious deficiencies in reading comprehension is due to the reader's unfamiliarity with the words used. Vocabulary load is a factor to be dealt with, and one of the better ways is not to seriously limit the number of words introduced, but to introduce the child to many, many new words.

4. Interest. The fourth key which I present to you is called the "Key of Interest." Interest is that spark of vitality, almost like electricity, that races along with energy carrying with it the burdensome and tiresom qualities which might otherwise bog down the reader struggling with the mechanics of the actual reading act. The child may frequently be impeded by his lack of skill and ability to cope with reading, but if there

is a strong thread of interest in the story, it will entice and draw him along page after page to seek the satisfying conclusion awaiting him.

Interest drives the reader forward, not only into the obvious interpretation of the material, but into the more subtle meanings and inferences of the writer. Interest aids the child to make those intuitive insights frequently referred to as "using context clues" to discover and understand new words and terms.

As teachers are aware of the strengthening force of interest to help develop independent readers--and this is certainly one of our most frequently stated objectives in teaching reading-the will provide their students with materials that are alive and filled with interest-arousing situations. We frequently decry the pallid, insipid, or sacchrine tone of materials and stories included in basal reading series. Those artificial, contrived stories based on a rigidly controlled vocabulary can provide little of spark necessary to to ignite the imaginations of contemporary children. They need reading materials which live and breathe and involve their reader emotionally and sensorially. Arbuthnot (1) has used a phrase in her evaluative criteria for judging good reading materials for children. She asks the question:

> Are the characters alive and memorable, or are they merely stereotypes? Or just names upon which to build the story ? Has the book a style that makes for comfortable reading, captivating the reader and keeping him tearing along from page to page?

I like that! It states so succintly and clearly what I mean by our using the key of interest to free readers from the plodding,

laborious, inept exercises sometimes referred to as reading.

With the lavish supply of good trade books in current educational funding, there is no excuse for any teacher's hampering students with boring drivel. Instead, every classroom should veritably teem with books--interesting, good books, to arouse and captivate the attention of young readers. To literally, as Fader (6) has phrased it, get them Hooked on Books.

We need to free them to read and let them read. Chambers (2) has suggested that today's reading teacher is so concientious in an attempt to teach children how to read that there is often little time allowed for children to read. He infers that many are actually over-teaching, and becoming so involved in the mechanical process and the mechanical materials that children are confined in a maze almost inescapable.

The Key of Interest is needed. Let us use it and set children once more on their way with interesting books. Let this pull of delight guide them into clear understanding, creative interpretation, and good comprehension.

5. Utility. My fifth and last key, I have called "The Key of Utility." Although it may be obvious what the value of this key really is, I feel it important to remind you once more of the importance of reading as a skill tool in all other areas of the curriculum. The ability to understand what one has read is so needed that I dare to state that I think it is the most significant single subject taught in our schools today. At all levels of education--elementary, secondary, college, or adult--reading

is essential for any successful participation or matriculation.

Beginning at the fourth grade and continuing up the ladder steps of education, reading is a means of learning. If one fails to understand, he fails to learn. Study skills become the prime factor in the quest for information, collecting data, independent research, or whatever other phase of study is involved. In our era of technological know-how, the ability to find out is uppermost in the value hierarchy of education. As a result, this fifth key becomes an absolute necessity to the student. Teachers must help students discover the utilitarian value of reading itself. It is imperative that we equip our students with the importance of its use to unlock and acquire the treasure store of knowledge. We as teachers must first test its value for ourselves in our own professional preparation. Then we can demonstrate as models for our students.

Key #5 encompasses four of the components to comprehension: namely, creative, critical, retentive, and functional. It is necessary in opening the deeper uses of reading powers to uncover and discern knowledge with clarity and force. Let us use it well, and work with our students to use it well.

Conclusion

I have discussed with you five keys to reading comprehension: Perception, Communication, Vocabulary, Interest, and Utility. Five keys which are to be handed on to your students for their use in developing freedom and facility in their reading. I have given

them freely, but remember their use is not always an easy task! Some of the locks to be opened are rusted and damaged by corrosive elements already. It will take much skill and patience if they are to be opened and made useful.

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